

From a Grandfather Clock to a School Desk

WANT a quick trip round the world? Then visit one of New Plymouth's furniture-makers where you'll find oak from Japan, mahogany from North Africa, rosewood from India, walnut from Spain or Italy, kapok from Indonesia, upholstery materials from the mills of England.

These are some of the materials used by the city's furniture and cabinetmakers' firms. There are more than a dozen of them, employing more than 60 men to make, for example, a bedroom suite for a State house in Huatoki Valley, lockers for a hospital ward, chairs for a school-room, desks for an office, fittings for a shop.

Oldest of them all is the family business of James Lobb and Co., established in 1913 and now employing a staff of 12 to make furniture of every type for distribution to many parts of the Dominion. This factory boasts that it can turn out anything from a kapok mattress to a well-sprung settee, and last year got through 30,000 feet of timber, more than 1100 yards of material and thousands of springs.

Almost as old is Purser Bros. Ltd., in business since 1921. This firm specialises in upholstery of period furniture—some of its work has been sent to Australia—and is fortunate in having some fine craftsmen on its staff, including its foreman, Mr. J. O'Brien, who has been with the firm almost since it started, and his son, another Mr. J. O'Brien.

Pursers have a most important job under way at present—work on two chairs in which the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh will sit at the Pukekura Park reception next January. They will be upholstered in a special damask, the colour and pattern of which is a top secret.

Another firm with a long association with New Plymouth is C. S. Cottam and Co., in business for 30 years and still turning out every type of furniture.

Just as versatile is H. Nimmo and Sons, Ltd., which sends out modern and period-type furniture to towns all over the country. It has three factories, one which does the cabinet-making, one which turns out soft goods and another which does the upholstery. It has been satisfying home-lovers' needs since 1925.

All these firms make and sell their own furniture.

But there are many one-man businesses whose products are purchased by the Maple furnishing company. It gets much of its furniture from Auckland and Wellington but also purchases New Plymouth-produced articles, the workmanship of which is considered to be as good as that of the larger centres.

Up in Lynton Street, off Carrington Road, is the 18-month-old factory of Duckett and Marsden, turning out furniture for the retail trade and using about 1500 feet of timber a month to do it.

Those in charge there, along with other cabinetmakers in New Plymouth, agree that the residents of this city are a conservative lot when it comes to buying furniture. They are at least two years behind the more sophisticated

Aucklanders and to-day are still accepting what buyers in the main centres are now deciding to reject.

There is general agreement, too, that the making of period furniture is an uneconomic proposition. The 40 to 50 hours spent in copying an antique chair, for example, would be more than long enough to turn out a complete suite of ordinary furniture.

Just what high-speed modern machinery and skilled tradesmen can achieve is indicated by these figures:—

From the time the timber is taken from the yard, to when it comes off the finishing line is 10 hours for a dressing table, eight for a tallboy, three for a dining chair of orthodox design and eight to 10 hours for a dining table.

Though all the city's furniture makers concentrate on the "bread-and-butter"

lines, they can and do turn out the more unusual.

Duckett and Marsden once made a suite in which there were 25 curved drawers. Then there are the grandfather clock cases, which take about 30 hours to fashion from rosewood or mahogany. It is in the manufacture of these that machinery yields way to the skill of hand and eye. The rounded tops of the clocks are bent out of a solid piece of wood. This is how it is done. Saw cuts are made at intervals in the wood to give it flexibility and when the wood is bent to the desired shape the cuts close up, leaving a perfectly shaped arch.

This work makes a vivid contrast with the high-speed vertical spindle, the machine most frequently used in most furniture factories. The wood is run past a knife and from the knife, spinning at from 6,000 to 9,000 revolutions a minute, it receives the desired shape. Dozens of knives or heads can be used on this versatile machine, which needs to be in the charge of a skilled operator.

Proud of their craft and sorry to see some of its practices rapidly disappearing are two other well-known members of the trade in New Plymouth. They are J. T. Rogers and Arnold H. White, both of whom like their customers to have their furniture upholstered as it was 20 years ago—with inches of stitched fur stuffing instead of the thin layer of flock or flax between wood and covering, found in many of to-day's products. The former method costs more because it takes longer, they agree, but the upholstery will last 25 years and is far more comfortable.

At Mr. Rogers' furniture factory they still talk about the oldest article they ever had to repair—an 18-foot long dining-room table, more than 200 years old and held together with hand-made screws. It came to the factory to be cut down to a small family size.

And there are reminiscent chuckles about the articles found in settees brought in for recovering—threepences, pennies, shoes and even crayfish legs, but never a £5 note.

Mr. White, in business in New Plymouth since 1923, is not only an upholsterer but a car trimmer as well. When he started work, he made hoods for Model T Fords; now he makes slip covers for the seats of 1953 saloons.

Less well-known is the work of the Taranaki Education Board staff who, in the board's workshops in New Plymouth, make tables, chairs, desks and other furniture for schools all over the province. Their work has to stand up to really hard wear—that's why the chairs have five-ply seats—but it still looks attractive. Much of the furniture in the board's Lemon Street offices was made in the workshops, including the horseshoe table at which dozens of board members have discussed the problems of classroom shortage, increasing rolls and departmental red-tape.



POLISHING THE ROSEWOOD CASE of a grandfather clock, the top curved piece of which has been made by hand in a New Plymouth factory.